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The Potlatch in Anthropological Theory

A Re-evaluation of certain Ethnographic Data and Theoretical Approaches

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VORWORT DES HERAUSGEBERS

Wir freuen uns, mit der vorliegenden Abhandlung die Diskussion um die Institution des POTLATCH bei den Indianern der nordamerikanischen Nordwestküste und seine Bedeutung für die ethnologische Forschung schlechthin um einen weiteren fachkundigen Beitrag bereichern zu können. Die Autorin, Marianne Bölscher, ist an der Simon Fraser University in Burnaby (British Columbia) tätig und befaßt sich u. a. mit Feldstudien bei den Haida im Vorfeld ihrer in Arbeit befindlichen Dissertation.

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One major feature the Northwest Coast societies share and which contributed to the area being considered a rather homogenous cultural area in anthropological literature is the potlatch. While the theories as to the nature and origin of this institution are diverse, it seems symptomatic that the word itself is not the one term originally applied in the various languages of these societies (Footnote 1) to the single institution or its distinct sub-forms: "Potlatch" is a word from the Chinook trade jargon, the 19th century "lingua franca" of the Northwest Coast, simply meaning "to give".

More specifically, what all potlatch-theorists would agree on is that it means the giving away of property in return for the recognition of the giver's social status. Importantly, it is not an affair between individuals, but between corporate groups acting as hosts led by the potlatch-giver and his household, and as guests, respectively.

Furthermore, all Northwest Coast societies had in common that they had no centralized political leadership but were amalgamations of economically and politically autonomous corporate groups sharing territory and resources. The potlatch, then, being carried out between these groups, served both to create c o m m u n i c a t i o n between them via the exchange of property and the witnessing of claims to status, and to establish and maintain the b o u n d a r i e s between these groups by defining the frame of group-membership. Potlatching thus regulated the relationship between "us" and "them" by activating intra-group solidarity on the one hand, and inter-group communication on the other.

The medium was the giving away of property to the other group. This property, the potlatch gifts, was expected to be compensated for by returned gifts in future potlatches. Group solidarity was displayed by members of the host's lineage contributing to the property to be given away. In return, they profited from the potlatch by announcing their own changes in status, by having their children's transition rites witnessed by the public. The essential part of the public was the "other side": the opposite moiety or the other phratry residing in the host's village, or, among the southern societies, other corporate groups.

The amounts of property distributed varied according to the extent of the claim to promotion in rank the leader of the household wished to make. If not enough property could be accumulated by the host group itself, it had to borrow from other groups. This procedure preceded the potlatch and these loans were expected to be repaid with interest. Thus the proceedings surrounding the potlatch event in some cases included a "capital investment and loan" system (Footnote 2).

Gifts were made to those who had performed tasks, that is, they were actually a payment for expenses and efforts - such as cutting timber and doing carpentry work for house-building potlatches; funeral services for memorial potlatches, etc. - as well as for witnessing the host's change in social status. Since only members of the non-host groups performed these tasks, gifts were given to guests exclusively.

Another feature of the potlatch inherent most of all in the Southern Kwakiutl potlatch, which, due to Franz Boas' extensive work received much attention, was c o m p e t i t i o n : The potlatch obligation to give and give back with interest was taken as a strategic device for status gain, where it became a matter of not just getting back one's own expenditures, but of outdoing one's opponent. The picture that emerged from these accounts, however, was distorted because, at the time of Boas' field-work in the late

19th century, the Kwakiutl were undergoing massive social change which also affected their potlatching: Due to serious population decline by disease and the establishment of Hudson's Bay Company trading posts, the various tribes of the Kwakiutl had amalgamated in only a couple of villages. The high death rate caused by various epidemics which the Whites had introduced led to a large number of ranked positions being vacant. In turn, the fur-trade and wage labour for whites enabled natives who traditionally had no access to high ranking positions to get access to potlatching resources. This development led to the unprecedented rise of a "nouveau riche" elite (Footnote 3). The late 19th century potlatch thus became atypical of previous potlatching, taking on rather destructive forms of "fighting with property."

This account so far has only pointed out some general common features of the potlatch (Footnote 4). As to its underlying function, however, various explanations have been given. They range from viewing the potlatch as a decadent institution carried out between egocentric aggressive individuals, i. e. resorting to psychological explanation, to considering the potlatch a benevolent institution to balance ecological shortcomings and feed the poor. While it is not within the scope of this paper to examine these particular approaches (Footnote 5), the very diversity of these explanations seems to point to the fact that the Northwest Coast, upon closer examination, is not as unified a cultural area as it was made to be, and that what has come to be termed potlatch might well have had diverse origins as well as functions throughout the area (Footnote 6). Furthermore, the multiple functions of the potlatch account for it being a "total social phenomenon" (fait social total), involving a variety of institutions - economic, social, political, religious, jural, moral - of a given society, as was postulated by Marcel Mauss (1966).

Mauss was one of the first to view the potlatch within a comparative theoretical framework: he did not consider it as a unique singular phenomenon, but as a type of total social phenomenon, representing the archaic form of exchange between groups, and thus making it comparable to institutions in other parts of the world. Underlying this "total" type of exchange is the process of giving - receiving - given back. As it has since become fashionable to cite Mauss as the originator of the concept of reciprocity - the word itself, curiously, does not appear in his essay on The Gift - it seems feasible to take a closer look at what reciprocity involves, according to Mauss. All too often it has been perceived as a reversible mechanism, void of all tension, conflict and choice.

Mauss himself implied that giving, receiving or accepting, and giving back are not voluntary acts, but involve, most of all, obligation. The return of the gift is a matter of honour; not to give back is to be shamed. Furthermore, every return of a gift requires time: The gift hence necessarily implies the notion of credit. Therefore, with time, challenge and honour being implicated, Mauss' analysis involves more than the purely structural properties of giving and receiving, or, in Bourdieu's words,

"Cycles of reciprocity are not the irresistible gearing of obligatory practices found only in ancient tragedy: a gift may remain unrequited, if it meets with ingratitude; it may be spurned as an insult. Once the possibility is admitted that the 'mechanical law' or 'cycle of reciprocity' may not apply, the whole logic of practice is transformed." (1977:8; my emphasis).

While Mauss admitted to the time dimension as an important factor in reciprocal exchange, he tried to find the rationale for exchange in native exegetical explanation, in the "power of the goods exchanged" (Mauss 1966:41 ff.), rather than in the logic of the mechanism of exchange itself. In his evaluation of Mauss' work,

Lévi-Strauss (1950:xliff) criticizes him for this "phenomenological" element in his approach, which prevents it from becoming a truly structuralist analysis. However, a mechanistic, structural model of exchange misses out on precisely those elements of strategy, time and challenge that form an active part of exchange behaviour.

The contradictions inherent in a mechanistic structural explanation of the potlatch are easily seen in A. Rosman and P. Rubel's book Feasting with Mine Enemy (1971), which investigates the underlying structural relationships between forms of exchange as expressed in the potlatch and types of social structure. Their theoretical framework is adapted from Mauss' concept of reciprocity and Lévi-Strauss' (1969) theory that matrimonial exchange forms the basis of all patterns of reciprocity: Exchange of women between groups creates and maintains social relations, i. e. a l l i a n c e between groups; groups which become related as affines have marked relations with each other, relations of support and/or conflict. Besides Lévi-Strauss' theory of alliance, Rosman and Rubel also adopt his concept of structure and the building of structural models: Structural models "are the construct of the analyst" (ibid.:4), and the question of whether such models are conscious, that is, exist in the minds of the informants, is irrelevant (ibid.). By analysing recurrent exchange behaviour, they argue, the analyst is able to construct a model of the operation of exchange of women in order to demonstrate how this exchange operates logically. Marriage rules are seen as concise statements of how women move from group to group. If other kinds of exchange in a given group follow the same pattern, the kinship structure is verified. Hence they postulate a congruency of property exchange and matrimonial exchange among Northwest Coast societies.

Their procedure thus begins with the analysis of Northwest Coast marriage rules as they can be sorted out of ethnographic literature, claiming that three of the six societies examined (Tlingit, Haida and Tsimshian) have preferential cross-cousin marriage while being matrilineal, the other three (Bella Coola, Nootka and Kwakiutl) have ambilateral descent and no specific marriage rules. The former, they assume, constitute elementary structures, the latter complex structures (ibid.:7) in the Lévi-Straussian sense. By ordering the data on exchange during potlatches in terms of the structural models developed from the marriage rules, they claim to discover a correspondence between exchange of women and potlatch goods which they find makes the particular kinds of potlatches in these societies more comprehensible. Moreover, they argue that, in the case of the Tlingit and Haida, the accompanying exchange of property between affines makes otherwise structurally unstable matrimonial exchange (patrilineal cross-cousin marriage) more stable (Footnote 7). What they are trying to point out is that the pattern of exchange during potlatches, i.e. the guest/host division, always reflects the relationship between kin and affines. This mechanical model of potlatch exchange is vulnerable to critique from various sides. The main point to be made here is that it mistakes the assumed reality of the rule and hence model, for the model of reality.

Rosman and Rubel maintain that marriage "rules", such as "one should marry one's FZD" (Haida/Tlingit) or "one should marry one's MBD" (Tsimshian) justify the existence of elementary structures. While, ever since Lévi-Strauss published the second preface to Elementary Structures of Kinship (1967; engl. 1969), his followers have been at ease to point to the relativity and ideal nature of his terms "complex" and "elementary", Rosman and Rubel's assumption of marriage preferences creating specific marriage patterns, i. e. alliance categories among the Northern societies rests on rather shaky grounds.

Certain critics have pointed out to them that their analysis of so-called Tsimshian marriage rules relies on "model building of the butterfly collecting sort" (Footnote 8); moreover, it is not only statistical evidence that betrays the models, but in the case of the Haida, for example, more than one marriage "rule" exists: Besides a p r e f e r e n c e for the FZD, Haidas also state a preference for the MBD (Footnote 9). Especially successors to chiefly positions are supposed to marry this way. As Vaughan (1976:7) has pointed out, this presents "a puzzling situation, since one might suspect that it is the marriages of the chiefs that are of utmost importance since it is they who sponsor the potlatches." De Laguna notes a similar ambiguity of marriage preference for the Tlingit: "A young man who is succeeding to the title of his maternal uncle would marry his uncle's widow, and she would be ideally his paternal aunt" (1952:7 - Footnote 10). Rosman and Rubel discard this statement as erroneous, although it is based on extensive field-work.

Field-data on 19th century Haida marriages (Footnote 11), however, points to many instances of bilateral cross-cousin marriage, where the marriage partner (both male and female) was referred to as a unilateral cross-cousin, usually as one from the father's side. In one informant's words: "They married their aunties on their father's side. They married their father's nephews, too/if they were girls/" (Footnote 12). This points to an interesting factor involved in traditional Haida - and probably Tlingit - marriage, namely that the marriage partners were defined according to strategically important groups, rather than being chosen solely b e c a u s e they belonged to a particular group/lineage/. Similarly, a spouse was defined as a MBD in certain circumstances: She was defined as the uncle (MB)'s daughter to whom the groom would succeed or had already succeeded. As such, she was a member of the household the nephew inherited, although of the opposite moiety, as was required. In Haida myth, the incumbent nephew in almost all instances marries his MBD, who, in turn plays the role of mediator between uncle (chief) and nephew (successor) (Footnote 13). In other words, marriage in a political sense emphasized the spouse as MBD, while marriage in the sense of social categories defined the spouse as FZD, the most strategic marriage, of course, being to a wife who fulfilled both roles on demand: the bilateral cross-cousin.

Other points of criticism have been levelled against Rosman and Rubel which I will not review here (Footnote 14). What all critics seem to agree on, though, is that there are decision-making processes other than those decided by marriage "rules" involved in the potlatch which must be taken into account in explaining it, and that it is strategic that decide kinship behaviour in the North as well as in the South.

However, we have moved from potlatch interpretation to anthropological theory if we raise the question that is implied in the above criticism: What if people do not behave according to their conscious models, or to "structures" deduced by the analyst; or what if the conscious models do not justify one single structural type? Do we have to dismiss the theory built on these models altogether, assuming another monocausal explanation of the potlatch, or do we leave it all open to unspecified "strategies"? We are faced with the dilemma that, while the former interpretations of the potlatch display a poor level of theoretical argument, the above kind of structuralist analysis is easily falsifiable on the basis of the data used. A central objection that aims at structuralist kinship theory in general and at Rosman and Rubel's potlatch theory in particular is whether we can assume that a set of rules actually guides the kinship behaviour of individuals and groups, or at least: to what extent do prescriptions actually direct it? Would it seem possible that strategies, as manifestations of individual and collective interests that are symbo-

lic as well as material in nature, are underlying both potlatch and marriage action? To arrive at more satisfying interpretations and theoretical models of the potlatch it would seem important that the very nature of these strategies be investigated. This means going beyond using brief native quotes of marriage-, succession- and residence "rules" or preferences as sole evidence for underlying structural properties of the relations of kin groups. Instead, it is useful to investigate actual cases of marriage- and reciprocity transactions, not only to determine the statistical occurrence but also the conscious and unconscious motivations underlying such "execution of rules" (Footnote 15). In other words, we must bridge the gap between structure and action, or rule and choice, and account for the circumstances under which individuals define their interests according to specific groups and legitimate these by "rules" (Footnote 16).

To confirm these suggestions, it seems worthwhile to examine another book aiming at an explanation of the potlatch: John Adams' study of the Gitksan Potlatch (1973), based on field-research among a Tsimshian group that continued potlatching in the mid-1960's. Although aiming at another monocausal explanation, it provides some details about the actual modus operandi of the potlatch, which, however, remain largely unanalysed.

Adams adapts Mauss' reciprocity theme, the "socially binding etiquette of gift-giving" (ibid.:3), thus taking issue with the previously mentioned explanations in terms of competition and rivalry, asserting that potlatches are not advantage seeking feasts carried out by a number of egocentric individuals, but in effect they form a "systematic pattern which is based upon reciprocity" (ibid.:2). Even more, "the feasts are business meetings at which a person sits in a place assigned to him" (ibid.:VI). What he proposes, then, is to view the potlatch as an equilibrating device on two levels:

- First of all, there is the "unconscious model" of the Tsimshian themselves: They express that the basic function of the potlatch - the only varieties held among the Gitksan are the funeral- and pole-raising potlatch - is to provide a "funeral fund": by reciprocally meeting expenses, one pays one's contributions to one's own side's funerals in order to have funeral expenses taken care of after one's death by the other side (ibid.:74).
- Furthermore, claims to succession of ranking positions are publicly announced through making cash contributions at funeral feasts where the other side is witness to the procedure.

Adams himself investigates beyond this immediate function and tries to find underlying explanations for the Gitksans' interest in maintaining patterns of traditional social organization and the feasting to validate it. The most important fact that emerges from his analysis of present socio-economic conditions among the Gitksan is that hunting territories and traplines as well as berrying spots and fishing grounds are still owned and controlled by the Houses (corporate groups) in the various villages. The ranking system within the Houses hence reflects the scale of authority over resources. The main function of the potlatch, or feast (Footnote 17), therefore, as Adams sees it, is to define the people who share resources: The categories of people who contribute to the potlatch share an interest in the productive resources which are being inherited by the host, i. e. the fishing and hunting grounds. Anyone who contributes money to a feast has a claim to use them. The potlatch contribution by the co-hosts therefore "serves to define groups within the system, one of which includes all the people who have rights to the productive resources of the host, the other which has no such rights (ibid.:73).

The groups that reciprocate at a potlatch, then, are not linked as kin and affines, but it is property rights, not ties of marriage, that underlie the division into hosts and guests. His proposition therefore is that the potlatch does not redistribute resources to people, as had been claimed before, but that it serves to redistribute people to resources: "One's status and identity are recognized and confirmed by the potlatch which allows all participants to know which territory one is associated with by virtue of the name one uses when making contributions. No one in the society lacks such assignment" (ibid.:102).

Adams hence proposes an economically-grounded explanation of the potlatch instead of one based on structural exchange theory. Are these two explanations incompatible, however, if one looks at the data from the point of view of the modus operandi of the assignment of people to resources?

A re-analysis of the data Adams presents throws a different light on the nature of the rules of genealogies, group membership and -affiliations he presents, and points to the Tsimshians' flexibility and invention when it comes to defining group membership. Resources are owned by the Houses, hence their members have a vested interest in the perpetuity of the Houses to maintain their property rights. On the other hand, while there are norms, even rules of how group membership should be defined, almost every actual case Adams describes manifests a manipulation of these rules. Even lineage affiliations is redefined and manipulated according to the amount of the distributions they make at particular potlatches (consult for p. 57 ff. in particular). People only worry that someone will give too little, so funeral expenses won't be met. If one turns to the conscious model or etiquette which the Tsimshian maintain, one can express it the following way: only because individuals' and groups' strategic actions are imminent is there the postulation of "breaking even".

Garfield (1939:179 ff.) reports similar incidences of choice and manipulation in Coast Tsimshian succession to chieftainship and the potlatching associated with it. Her account includes examples of adoption into a different lineage to enable a contender to validate his claim to a title by potlatching; ambitious individuals acquiring such positions by pooling their wealth; redefining genealogical links, etc. Similarly Stearns (1982) analyses flexibility, strategies and disputes in Haida succession to chiefship and the way these are resolved. To what extent rules of succession and genealogical links serve more to legitimate action than to guide behaviour is again illustrated by a case the author witnessed at a "potlatch" among the /Masset-/Haida in recent times: After it had become symbolically as well as materially relevant - in the sense of legitimating being a skilled carver - to trace one's genealogy back to a skilled and famous carver some generations ago, a number of individuals re-investigated their genealogies and established themselves as great-(great-) grandchildren of this person - whether patrilineally or matrilineally seemed irrelevant at this moment; the main purpose being to produce some kind of blood-links with this individual.

However, it is important to note that what constitutes norms of succession and etiquette is not explicit (see also Stearns 1982), but instead, there is a narrow margin between appropriate behaviour and over-ambitiousness in attaining rank and prestige. The "gentleman" in Northwest Coast society, the one who deserves and preserves his inherited social standing, acts within a loosely defined framework of giving just the right amount at the right time, acknowledging that he is "above things" in the sense that he belittles his own contributions to potlatches, or rhetorically elevates his opponents in order to elevate himself.

Therefore, "strategy" and "manipulation" must not be understood as resulting from aggressive individual behaviour in extreme or in exceptional cases; rather, they

constitute the manner in which collective and individual aspirations are voiced and acted out within the framework of reciprocity and rank. The proper way of making claims includes considerable verbal skill in public speech-making, successful and generous distribution and handling of resources, and behaviour that cannot be put to shame by others. However, what in particular constitutes this delicate field of public intercourse and the ambiguous social relationship between self and others, which is constantly evaluated by public opinion, is an area that remains to be analysed in more detail.

FOOTNOTES:

- 1) I am restricting myself here to the nuclear part of the Northwest Coast, which includes the Nootka, Kwakiutl, Bella Coola, Tlingit, Tsimshian and Haida. Special emphasis will be placed on the latter three societies.
- 2) See Drucker/Heizer 1967:53; Boas 1891. Actually, the term is a bit misleading, as "capital investment and loan" is a term describing transactions within the capitalist mode of production of Western society. While the natives of the Northwest Coast definitely keep track of loans of property and expect to be rewarded when these are repaid, the whole system of property exchange is based on the social control forces of honour and shame, and the corporate nature of the groups involved - all of these further controlled and directed by public opinion. C. f. Curtis (1915:143): "It has been said of the potlatch that 'the underlying principle is that of the interest-bearing investment of property'. This is impossible. A Kwakiutl would subject himself to ridicule by demanding interest when he received a gift in requital of one of like amount made by him."
- 3) For a discussion of this aspect, see also Drucker 1939 (1978): fn. p. 144.
- 4) This brief summary of the main features of the potlatch basically agrees with Barnett's (1938) analysis.
- 5) For the "psychological approach" see Benedict 1934. Codere (1956) refuted Benedict's widely known interpretation. In a book on the Southern Kwakiutl potlatch (1950) she argued that the potlatch in comparatively recent times had replaced warfare to channel competition. For the economic/ecological arguments, see Vayda 1961; Suttles 1960; Piddocke 1965.
- 6) Rosman and Rubel's analysis (see below) actually acknowledges these diverging functions, but only tries to explain them in terms of the diverging kinship and marriage structures of the area. The diversity of environmental conditions, social stratification and means of political control over resources, as well as the diffusion of elements of the potlatch throughout the area also have to be taken into account.
- 7) For the structural logic of patrilateral cross-cousin marriage in generalized exchange, see Lévi-Strauss 1969, chapter xxvii; Needham 1958. Needham, in fact, renounces the claim that the Haida p r e s c r i b e patrilateral cross-cousin marriage.
- 8) Adams/Kasakoff (1973:417). These authors also note, "our conclusion from extensive testing of Gitksan data is that the elementary structures exist only in the conscious models, and that actual marriage patterns there are complex" (ibid.:416).
- 9) The ethnographic sources which are quoted invariably for preferential patrilateral cross-cousin marriage among the Haida are Swanton (1905a:68) and Murdock (1934:364).

- 10) See also Oberg (1973:34 ff.): "In fact, the fundamental marriage pattern /among the Tlingit/ is one with a woman who is at once the father's sister's daughter and the mother's brother's daughter, for the father's sister's daughter is often married to one's mother's brother."
 - 11) These data were compiled for the Masset Haida by Mary Lee Stearns (c. f. Stearns 1981) and myself from church records, band registers and informants' recollections. They will be analysed in detail in the author's doctoral thesis (forthcoming).
 - 12) Mrs. Emma Matthews, personal communication. For similar practices among the Tlingit, see Jones (1914:128).
 - 13) C. f. Swanton 1905b, Texts no. 3, 9, 23, 17, 48. Swanton 1908, Texts no. 31, 35, 69, 70, 72, 76. In commenting on Rosman and Rubel's book, Lévi-Strauss (1973:233) notes this divergence between marriage preference according to native quotation and marriage in myth, but resorts to the rather fuzzy conclusion that there might have existed a "divergence between ideology and practice which expressed a tension between lineages".
 - 14) C. f. Kasakoff 1974; Adams/Kasakoff, op. cit; Vaughan, op. cit.
 - 15) I am, of course aware, that for the Northwest Coast societies there are some obstacles to this. The rules and practices in question here have largely fallen out of practice and thus cannot be observed within the framework of synchronic ethnographic description.
 - 16) The reader will notice my affinity to situational and transactional analysis, but most of all, to Bourdieu's theory of practice (c. f. Bourdieu 1977).
 - 17) Adams does not distinguish between the two, whereas Drucker and Heizer note that "the Indians of the coast invariably distinguish between feasts and potlatches, both in terminology and in formal procedure" (1967:141).
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